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The UK referendum on continued membership of the European Union, which produced a victory for the 'Leave' campaign, was less a debate on the pros and cons of membership than a proxy for discussions about race and migration; specifically, who belonged and had rights (or should have rights) and who didn't (and shouldn't). One of the key slogans of those arguing for exit from the EU was: 'we want our country back'. The racialized discourses at work here were not only present explicitly in the politics of the event; they are implicit in much social scientific analysis. Populist political claims are mirrored by an equivalent social scientific 'presentism' that elides proper historical context. In this chapter, I discuss the importance of understanding Brexit in the context of an historical sociological understanding that would enable us to make better sense of the politics of the present.

### **I – Race and Class in the Brexit Debates**

The last few weeks of campaigning, prior to the UK's referendum on leaving the European Union, were marked by an increasingly toxic discourse on citizenship and belonging and the rights that pertain as a consequence. This discourse provided at least part of the context for the brutal killing, before the vote, of a socialist and progressive MP, Jo Cox; and was followed by increasing racist and xenophobic attacks on migrants and minorities after the decision for Brexit (see Emejulu 2016). 'Put Britain first' was the call that resounded not only from Batley and Spence, where Jo Cox was murdered, but, in various degrees of intensity, from up and down and across the country. It was also mobilized in media and social scientific accounts that sought to focus attention, in particular, on the plight of a *white (English) working class*. As Paul Mason (2016) asked in *The Guardian*, 'What happens when, instead of Poles, it is poor white English people herded into the polytunnels of Kent to pick strawberries for union-busting gangmasters?' The prioritization of 'poor white English people' over presumably, poor, white Poles points to an analysis of class that is deeply racialized and ethnicized and one that marked many of the debates on Brexit.

Racializing the working-class in the context of a populist discourse that seeks to 'take our country back' both plays into and reinforces problematic assumptions about who belongs, who has rights, and whose quality of life should have priority in public policy. It also works with a misguided sense of who 'we' are and how 'we' came to be. The 'we' that was dominant within public debate on Brexit was a 'we' that was believed to be historically constituted in national terms and it was this history of being located within the nation that was seen to determine who should or should not have rights. The most visceral attacks came in relation to a sense of that national community having been betrayed by a metropolitan elite that appeared to care more for the situation of 'non-British' others than it did for the 'legitimate' citizens of Britain. However, as I will go on to argue, if we do not understand how we came to be politically constituted as a nation, as Britain, then our solutions to the manifest problems we are facing are likely to be profoundly misguided.

Since its very inception as a common political unit in 1707, Britain has not been an independent country, but part of broader political entities; most significantly empire, then the Commonwealth

and, from 1973, the European Union. There has been no independent Britain, no 'island nation'; in fact, this period is rather marked by the creation of a racially stratified political formation that Britain led to its own advantage (O'Toole 2016; Bhabra 2016c). The rancour that marks the Brexit debate seems to stem more from the loss of this privileged position based as it is on white elites and a working class offered the opportunity to see themselves as better than the darker subjects of empire – hierarchies of class and caste if you will, embodied in the hierarchies of race. Austerity has simply provided the fertile ground for its re-emergence and expression.

As I will go on to argue, what it is to be British cannot be understood separately from empire or the imperial modes of governance that remained dominant well into the twentieth century. In the immediate post-war period, for example, Britain explicitly refused to consider itself as a nation and maintained empire and the Commonwealth as its key political imaginaries when thinking about what it meant to be British. While there is a much longer history that rests on the vicissitudes of empire and forms of imperial governance, this chapter is concerned with a shorter history: one that sets the emergence of Britain, and what it is to be British, in the context of the decolonization of empire. Debates on British citizenship only emerged in the metropole in the 1940s and it was not until 1981 that there was a legal statute specifying British citizenship as a category distinct from the earlier forms that had created a common citizenship status *across the populations of the UK and its colonies*. Disentangling a particular form of British citizenship from these earlier models was a protracted process and involved taking rights away from some citizens on the basis of race and colonial status (Karatani 2003).

## II – Conceptualizations of Citizenship

In contrast to how citizenship is represented in many social scientific accounts – which relate its emergence and development to the modern nation-state – the political context for the emergence of British citizenship was empire. Rogers Brubaker (1989, 1990), for example, explicitly ties the concept of citizenship with membership of a nation-state and operates with two ideal-typical constructions. One is France, which he presents as the originary modern nation-state, where conceptions of nationhood and citizenship cohere around political unity rather than shared culture and continue to bear the mark of their origin in the 1789 revolution. The other is the idea of nation-state as *ethnie* exemplified by the unification of Germany in 1871 where political unity is understood as derivative of ethnic and cultural unity. As he puts it: 'If the French conception of nationhood has been universalist, assimilationist, and state-centred, the German conception been particularist, organic, and *Volk*-centred' (1989: 8). In each case, it is easy to elide empire in its relation to the construction of the national political community. In Germany's case, this is because the German empire was a relatively brief and ultimately failed project, defeated in the two World Wars (see, Steinmetz 2007). In the case of France, empire is elided because of the apparent universalism of the republican claim undergirding conceptions of citizenship (see, Stovall 2006, Rosanvallon 2013). Even where empire is mentioned, it is the nation-state that is seen as the key determinant of citizenship, and empire is understood as a project of a preceding nation-state.

Britain is presented by Brubaker (1989) as a case that falls somewhere between the two. The obstacle to the development of national feelings akin to those that emerged in France and Germany, he suggests, is the composite nature of the UK which comprised England, Scotland, Wales, and

Ireland. In contrast, I shall argue that empire is central to the construction of the 'political community' in Britain and its related conceptions of citizenship.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, as is common with many writers on Britain, Brubaker only mentions empire at the point of it being left behind and does not comment on its role in constructing the very idea of Britain, nor of the deep consequences that it has had even after it has supposedly been left behind. For him, it was with the dismantling of its empire that Britain 'had to redefine itself as a nation-state, and to create for the first time a national citizenship' (1989: 10). While I would agree that this was the first time Britain developed an understanding of national citizenship, it did not do so by leaving empire behind, but rather in negotiation with the changing relationships that were part of its dismantling. It was this that provided the dominant frame for thinking about citizenship within Britain until, at least, its entry into Europe in 1973 (and the idea of a special relationship with the Commonwealth also figured in arguments to leave the EU in the present).

The shift from empire and Commonwealth to the European Union is significant in terms of other accounts of issues of British political community. It was during the decade that the British government was passing the Commonwealth Immigration Acts, which gradually took rights away from some citizens on the basis of race as will be discussed subsequently, that negotiations were also occurring about European membership. These negotiations were focused primarily on the free movement of capital and in Harold Wilson's own account of the negotiations, as Dummett and Nichol (1990) point out, the movement of labour was only mentioned in passing and as a very minor concern. Indeed, where immigration was discussed, they state, it was only discussed in terms of Commonwealth immigration and not in terms of the movement of people throughout the European Community. The key concern on the European side appeared to be how to limit the freedom of movement within Europe of British colonial and Commonwealth citizens. The domestic political imaginary, then, was entirely shaped by concerns with racialized others, even as the nation entered a larger political union that gave unlimited rights of movement to over 250 million people.

### **III – British Citizenship from Empire to Commonwealth**

Given the complex and variegated nature of the British imperial state, even giving a brief history of the different types of citizenship at play at any particular time is not an easy task. In brief, up until 1948, when Britain enacted the British Nationality Act, the populations of Britain and its Dominions and colonies (both former and continuing) were understood as *British subjects*; after 1948, they were designated as *Commonwealth citizens* (Dummett 1994, Karatani 2003). People were not subjects of an authority specific to local territories, but were all subjects of British Empire or (later) citizens of the Commonwealth (whether they were in Britain or elsewhere). The impetus for the British Nationality Act was not struggles internal to Britain, but rather, a consequence of the political arguments and activities within Dominion countries and the moves for independence by India. From the early twentieth century onwards, the Dominions or, as they also came to be known, the Old Commonwealth countries (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) negotiated greater local autonomy and sovereignty from Britain (Karatani 2003). This was done primarily in relation to arguments for controlling movement into these territories by the darker subjects of Empire.

The unity of the Empire had been predicated, at least rhetorically, on free movement within the imperial polity of all subjects. The 'whites only' immigration policies instituted by Canada and

Australia threatened this underlying principle. While these moves were initially resisted by the British government, by the 1930s an accommodation was reached that gave the Dominion countries greater autonomy over such matters, and by the late 1940s, they had established themselves as countries fully independent of Empire. In response to the move by these countries breaking away from formal subordination within the imperial polity, and India asserting its independence in 1947, Britain set out the British Nationality Act where British subjecthood was now termed Commonwealth citizenship and this was itself categorized into four different sub-groups. These were: (1) Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC), (2) Citizens of independent Commonwealth countries, (3) British subjects without citizenship (BSWC), and (4) British protected persons (BPP) (Karatani 2003: 116).

At the very moment that the British government first sought to clarify what British citizenship meant, then, people in the colonies were formally stated to share citizenship with people in Britain and populations of the former colonies and Dominions were also regarded as citizens of the Commonwealth. This meant that they continued to have rights to travel to, and to live in, Britain by virtue of remaining within the Commonwealth. Part of the explanation for this, as Hansen argues, was the ideological commitment to the Old Commonwealth and, in particular, the fact that these countries 'were central to the United Kingdom's economic and foreign policy' (2000: 17). Further, as the debates over the subsequent decades illustrated, to institute immigration control would be to concede the end of the Commonwealth and the role and status of Britain as a world power and many British officials were not ready to do this in the immediate post-war period (Hansen 2000). With increasing moves towards decolonization by the colonized countries, and the increased fears of 'coloured immigration' into Britain, the attachments to Commonwealth loosened. These were only formally disentangled with Britain's entry into the European Community and the end also of the system of Commonwealth preferences in relation to trade in goods (Holmwood 2000).

#### **IV- Multicultural British Citizens and Citizenship**

Nineteen forty-eight was not only the year of the British Nationality Act, but, as James Hampshire (2005) points out, it was also the year that the *Empire Windrush* entered the Thames and close on 500 West Indians, holding British passports, disembarked at Tilbury Dock. Although India and Pakistan had declared their independence from the British Empire, Britain was still an imperial state with a number of colonies. More importantly, as discussed above, it continued to understand itself as presiding over a territory greater than that of the island on which Westminster was based. This imperial territory was populated by British subjects, or now Commonwealth citizens, all of whom had the right to travel and to live and work across its domains (subject, of course, to the racist immigration policies of local territories, e.g. Canada and Australia). Given the realities of empire, the movement of people was not an unusual or unexpected occurrence. Populations moved – indeed, many had been forcibly moved through enslavement and systems of bonded labour – through the various circuits of empire throughout its history. Indeed, the British, and more broadly the Europeans, had colonized much of the world through processes of migration starting in the fifteenth century. By the nineteenth and early twentieth century such emigration was being encouraged by the British government 'through policies such as the Free Passage Scheme of 1919 and the 1922 Empire Settlement Act' (Hampshire 2005: 8). What makes the *Windrush* significant is the fact that it was the darker citizens of empire who were exercising their rights to move freely and legally as many

of their paler compatriots had been doing throughout history, albeit without the legal sanction of the territories they entered.

As Hampshire argues, this movement of people ‘was a movement of citizens within an imperial polity, rather than a movement of aliens to a sovereign territory’ (2005: 10). This rather mundane event – of Commonwealth citizens moving within the bounds of the Commonwealth – has, subsequently, become foundational to mythologies of the changing nature (or, more accurately, face) of Britain. Mythologies that continue to reverberate in the present and have taken on a renewed political vibrancy in light of the debates regarding our continued EU membership. While the event of *Windrush* is often cited as the inauguration of British multiculturalism, it could be argued, as the British government itself argued, that the British Empire and later Commonwealth was, in its very constitution, multiracial and culturally diverse (Karatani 2003). Given that the polity under consideration was understood as a common space, through which all subjects / citizens were free to move, then cultural diversity – in all its ethno-linguistic variety – was its common and unifying condition. This cultural diversity, however, was also hierarchically organized around concurrent ideas of racial difference that would come to determine the shape of British citizenship over the subsequent decades.<sup>ii</sup> While Britain had initially rejected an immigration policy based on racial designation, this was soon to dominate the debates on population movement as the consolidated loss of empire left behind it a small country unsure of itself or its place in a changing world.

Notwithstanding the easy association of citizenship with the nation-state, then, British citizenship emerged in – and was configured by – the multiracial and ethnolinguistically plural context of empire and Commonwealth. The construction of darker citizens *as aliens* over the subsequent decades was to be based on a visceral understanding of difference predicated on race rather than in relation to any legal basis. Indeed, the Cabinet seemed to have tied itself up in knots in the 1950s trying to resolve the conundrum of limiting migration from the New Commonwealth countries without it appearing as if this was being done in a racially discriminatory way. As Hansen sets out, a draft bill on restricting the migration of British subjects was debated in 1955 which included sweeping powers for ministers ‘to limit migration, impose conditions on entry, and deport British subjects resident in Britain’ (Hansen 2000: 75). The interdepartmental committee assessing the feasibility of the bill suggested that there was a need for migration control but that this ‘would be impossible to justify on purely economic grounds’, as the committee had not found any ‘evidence that immigrants were an undue burden on National Assistance’ (Hansen 2000: 75). Some within the Cabinet assumed that this bill would not apply to Old Commonwealth citizens and the Colonial Secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, ‘made it clear that he would find the exclusive application of migration restrictions to colonial immigrants intolerable’ (Hansen 2000: 77). Political divisions within the Cabinet, and an overwhelming commitment to the Commonwealth in terms of how it secured Britain’s position as a global power, meant that Britain, at least for now, maintained its open borders.

It was in the 1960s, that migration control moved from being an issue associated with Britain’s status in the world, to a more regional and national issue. This was the period of negotiations of Britain’s relationship to the newly formed European Community and also of what came to be termed ‘race riots’ in major cities in Britain. The attacks on minority communities in Nottingham and London made the migration of those who looked different a domestic issue and ultimately brought about the racist immigration acts of that decade. While the government had sought to informally restrict

the levels of coloured immigration through backroom deals with the colonies and New Commonwealth countries – in order to maintain the principle of ‘the statutory right of all British subjects to enter and remain in the United Kingdom’ (Hansen 2000: 95) – the numbers continued to increase; although it should also be stated that these numbers were far outweighed by Irish and other European migrants during this period. By the time of the 1961 census, for example, the foreign born population of Britain was 5% of the total population. Out of the top ten sending countries, eight were white and only two were darker nations. There were 683,000 people born in Ireland, 121,000 from Germany, 120,000 from Poland (to take just the top three white populations) and from the darker countries, there were 157,000 from India and 100,000 from Jamaica.<sup>iii</sup> The constant concerns about ‘coloured immigration’ belie the fact that the total white foreign-born population, the majority of whom would have been migrants or aliens, was about 10 times that of the ‘coloured’ population, the majority of whom would have been citizens.

The Commonwealth Immigration Acts of 1962 and 1968 were enacted precisely to restrict the freedom of movement of darker citizens and to enable those of the Old Commonwealth continued access. The British government presented its concern over movement into the country by New Commonwealth citizens as an issue of numbers and the fact that they ‘were entitled to claim all citizenship rights once inside the United Kingdom, and to be treated on an equal basis to those British who were born’ here (Karatani 2003: 132). However, no similar concern was expressed about Old Commonwealth citizens about whom the same was true. Instead, the CIA 1962 was enacted on the premise of maintaining favourable relations with OCW countries and restricting the rights of NCW citizens by now grouping them as OCW *citizens* and NCW *immigrants*.

The institution of a common citizenship – Citizens of the UK and the Colonies – in the British Nationality Act of 1948 meant that it ‘could only be replaced through a complicated process that risked political instability within the dependent territories’ (Hansen 2000: 104). As such, the most expedient solution was to retain that common citizenship but to discriminate among citizens in terms of their rights to enter and live within Britain. These restrictions, in the first Act of 1962, were to be applied to any Commonwealth citizen who had not been born in the UK or who did not hold a CUKC passport issued by the UK government (as opposed to the UK colonial office in the colonies or the Commonwealth countries). There was an Irish exemption from this Act which was seen as problematic both by those who would have preferred exemption for the citizens of the Dominions instead of the ‘disloyal Irish’ and those who were arguing that it was ‘a racist act designed to exclude immigrants [citizens] of colour’ (Hansen 2000: 118, 117). In effect, this Act brought into being two forms of citizenship – full and second-class citizenship – which were to have long-term implications for how issues of equality and justice would be dealt with in the UK.

## V

The standard accounts of political citizenship align it with the contours of the nation-state where non-citizens, ‘aliens’, are (or can be) admitted to citizenship (see Baubock 1994). In the British context, however, the defining of British citizenship has been predicated on the basis of making citizens into immigrants on the basis of an explicit racial hierarchy (Karatani 2003). Indeed, as Hampshire has comprehensively demonstrated, ‘the development of immigration controls in post-war Britain was governed by a racial demographic logic’ (2005: 77). This points to the current British

polity as deeply structured by race such that the state itself – and all associated concepts, such as citizenship – are themselves racialized (see Shilliam 2016). As the debates on Brexit brought to the fore, most social scientific and media accounts of inequality in Britain erase race and the racialized histories that configure our present society and polity. As such, they can only offer ‘white identity politics’ when what is needed is a thoroughgoing address of inequality grounded in an understanding of the history of the broader British imperial polity.

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<sup>i</sup> I use the term 'political community' to indicate that it extends beyond the geographical territory currently associated with the nation state. In fact, empire is equally central to the emergence and development of understandings of citizenship in both Germany and France, though that is not my topic here. For a related discussion on France, see Bhambra 2016a; and on Germany, see Bhambra 2016b.

<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, the designation between Old Commonwealth (the Dominions established on the basis of white settler colonisation) and the New Commonwealth (the darker skinned countries over whom imperial rule was exerted) was itself a racial designation.

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[http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_346219.pdf](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_346219.pdf)